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Lessons of place : a critical look at place-based education

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Lessons of Place: A Critical Look at Place-Based Education

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To be at all - to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them.

Nothing we do is unplaced.

– *Edward S. Casey*

Introduction and Rationale

Recently, ideas about educational reform have been dominated with an emphasis on national/state standards and high stakes testing. In this environment, value is placed on general and abstract examples and facts that are often not relevant to students' lived experiences. Learning, in this way, becomes less integrated and marginalizes what students can offer from their experiences of place, family, and community. Moreover, as our society becomes increasingly more global, local identities and histories often get overlooked for the perceived concept that homogeneity is better.

However, through place-based education students are provided with opportunities to connect with themselves, their community, and their local environment through real world learning experiences. In place-based education, learning is rooted in the lives and concerns of students and their communities. Students relate to problems

that are real and close, not abstract and remote. In a community context, they more easily see that issues are interrelated and that perspectives on these issues are often complex. They can conduct investigations in a hands-on way not hypothetically or virtually. Through firsthand experiences with real places and real issues, students are acting on what they are learning. This educational approach facilitates taking action that allows the learner to gain a sense of ownership, empowerment, and hope since local problems can be less overwhelming and solutions more readily implemented.

Furthermore, place-based education not only gives students knowledge of their community, but also validates their experiences outside the classroom as well as their own personal knowledge. If students can see themselves as part of a continuum from past to present, they will be able to value their role in the future. Teaching in this way has the potential of creating responsible citizenship, which remains one of the primary goals of education.

My interest in place-based education stems from reflections on my early childhood memories in school, where I experienced a disconnect between my classroom experiences and my immediate surroundings, and my interest in community work as an adult. Though I grew up in a neighborhood in Lower Manhattan that is both diverse and rich in history, I often found that what I was learning in the classroom often

did not relate to my own life. Information to learn gleaned from textbooks and teachers rather than from my environment and experiences. For this very reason, I found school to be removed from my interests and always felt that I had two selves – one in school and one out-of-school – but felt that my experiences out-of-school were not as important as subject areas in school. It was not until I started to run an after school program in my own community when I developed a profound interest in the idea of place and its impact on learning and teaching. At that point in my life, I had traveled, lived, and worked in many different cities – both across the United States and around the world. By experiencing different places, I became sensitive to my relationship with the surrounding environment. However, there was an inherent desire for me to return, understand, and work in the neighborhood I grew up in.

My studies at Bank Street have solidified an approach I naturally gravitated towards in my work as an educator. Places affect people, whether it is a neighborhood where someone grew up or where one is traveling through. The idea of understanding how the environment impacts learning and teaching and how it can be part of a curriculum is what place-based education is about. Children are drawn to the world around them – why not build on this natural curiosity?

Impact of Standards Based Reform

Standards based reform developed in response to the report, *A Nation at Risk*, about the condition of the U.S. educational system in the 1980s. As a result, standards were increasingly defined in terms of tangible explicit outcomes. Thus, in the late nineties every U.S. state introduced a set of accountability standards often accompanied by mandatory tests of student achievement and aimed to represent the common core knowledge that all citizens should have (Gibbs & Howley, 2000). What we have today are state-mandated assessment systems and No Child Left Behind requirements that bring with them intense district and school efforts focused on aligning what is taught with what will be tested.

However, these state-mandated assessment systems and requirements have unintended negative consequences, many of which impact the quality of instruction and student learning. Critics have argued that national and state standards have become too prescriptive and are accompanied by high stakes exams that have become punitive in time and removed from many realities of schools. Moreover, some feel that these methods emphasize extrinsic motivation and reinforcement that can change students' perception of learning.

Narrow Curriculum

In this era of standards driven accountability, content taught is often limited to content tested, thereby narrowing the depth and breadth of the curriculum. Certain subject areas such as reading, writing, and math are covered while other areas - social studies, art, and foreign languages – areas that are not tested, are often left out of the content areas (Meier, 2002). Adopting such a system means that curriculum related to children's interests or contemporary or spontaneous events must be ignored or at best noted in passing in order to cover the standardized curriculum. Furthermore, what is outlined to be studied in schools does not match well with student intentions or the world that students and teachers see daily and class time is typically too short for students to do their best work (Perrone, 2000).

In addition, standardization and testing inform classroom practices. According to one teacher's experiences: "because the tests now claim to measure exactly what should be taught, it is far easier - for better or worse - to script teaching down to a lesson for everyday in the year, each corresponding to a set of potential test questions" (Meier, 2002, p. 128). Unfortunately this environment is not encouraging teachers to follow their learning passions, strengths, and the interests of their students – all of the things that matter most in the local setting.

Focus on Extrinsic Motivation

One of the main aspects of standards driven accountability is its emphasis on extrinsic motivators such as high stakes exams. Extrinsic motivation is driven by the prospect of a reward or outcome. Standardized testing and curricula is led by the belief that by focusing attention on externally imposed tests, schools will produce higher achievement (Meier, 2002). However, a growing number of critics argue that extrinsic rewards may work in the short run, but the long-range effects may undermine other educational goals. According to a research study on motivation, when subjects had previously found intrinsic value in an activity, they lost interest after the extrinsic rewards were introduced and came to an end (Lashway, 2001). Using extrinsic reinforcement for a behavior reduces intrinsic satisfaction and though teachers may gain short-term compliance with extrinsic rewards, student interest in the material may be loss. Furthermore, extrinsic motivation may present philosophical differences. Rewards are based on an inherently asymmetrical relationship – the person offering the reward has the power (Lashway, 2001). In this type of relationship, the teacher is presumed to have superior knowledge and authority. However, if the goal is to encourage critical thinking and student independence, this method may be counterproductive.

Students' Perception to Standardized Curriculum

A similar impact can be seen in students' perception to standardized curriculum. Teachers in an elementary school were interviewed about their students' reactions to a standardized curriculum. They found that a tightly scripted curriculum associated with closely calibrated learning objectives tested at specific intervals was changing how their students viewed school and schoolwork (Pignatelli, 2005). For example, one teacher commented: "the message is being received earlier that only the surface is important and only the immediate is important.. kids come to school with issues that they wonder about, that they learn really fast to shut off and shut down because there is not time in the day to talk about it. I hear kids worrying more and more how they're doing on the test… so if you're a quick learner, someone who can regurgitate, have quick recall, pick up on trivia, put things in a framework that you can spit back on a test, then you succeed in school. (Pignatelli, 2005, p. 51). In another study, high school students were interviewed about the impact of standards on their learning. Some students in this study questioned whether or not the information being learned was really "sticking" with them, and many students wanted to know how what they learned would help them in the real world, implying that the current curriculum lacked purpose and relevance (Cauley, Certo, Chafin, & Moxley, 2008). Though test scores may have steadily risen over the

years, there seems to be hidden costs to the quality of instruction and learning in a standards-based reform system.

Place-based education is especially relevant today in an educational climate that is dominated by standardization and high stakes testing. With the pressures of accountability and at times, its connection to job promotion or demotion, standards and their accompanying tests diminish incentives for teachers to teach content that is not tested and encourage direct instruction over experiential or student-centered learning opportunities that make use of local settings. In addition, a standardized curriculum can deny children first hand experiences and emphasize abstract, long ago, and faraway information instead of focusing on the here and now of the child's world. This approach to teaching can lead to children who have lots of facts, but little understanding. Furthermore, in this type of curriculum, the inadvertent hidden message is that important things are far away and disconnected from children while nearby things such as the local community and environment are unimportant and negligible (Sobel, 1998). There can be a sense of alienation that students can experience when standardized schooling does not relate to them.

On the other hand, by having a curriculum based on a deep understanding of the communities that children live in, areas that are emotionally important to children are

emphasized and valued. More over, this approach aspires to helping children build a sense of commitment to place and community and inspires students to want to make a difference (Sobel, 1998). It connects children in more meaningful ways to their locale rather than about adhering to a set of educational principles created by regional or national agencies. Place- based education also has broader goals that move beyond academics such as connecting students to personal development, ethical decision making, and committed participation in civic life. (Gibbs & Howley, 2000)

What is Place-Based Education?

Place-based education is an approach to teaching and learning that uses local environments – social, cultural, political, and natural – as the context for students' educational experiences. This emphasis on students' local context addresses what Dewey describes as the lack of connection between formal school and students' lives, a disconnect that makes learning an imposed chore rather than an opportunity to explore questions that come from students' natural curiosity (Dewey, 1915). By situating learning in the lives and concerns of students and their communities, place-based education takes advantage of this natural curiosity and their desire to be valued by others. Learning becomes more relevant to the lived experience of students and teachers. It is also an approach that seeks to draw out connections between students and their community. In this sense, it can help students come to know and care for the place in which they live.

Characteristics of Place-Based Education

Place-based education can take many different forms. It may mean learning history and language arts through interviews with community elders. Or it can mean studying local traffic patterns and making recommendations to city officials. Since place-based education is specific to particular locales, there are no standard curricular models. However, there are common characteristics of place-based education which include: 1) emerges from the particular attributes of a place; 2) emphasizes learning experiences that allow students to become the creators of knowledge rather than the consumers of knowledge created by others; 3) driven by students' questions; 4) utilizes teachers as facilitators and co-learners; 5) brings community members into an active role in the classroom; and 6) assesses student work based on competence and contribution to community well-being and sustainability (Smith, 2002).

A review of place-based education programs also reveal five thematic categories: 1) *Cultural Studies*: students conduct investigations of local history and cultural phenomenon, and identify themes that are important to the long-term viability of the community; 2) *Nature Studies*: students learn about local natural phenomena with a focus on questions drawn from children's immediate experiences rather than on definitions and general principles; 3) *Real World Problem Solving*: students identify issues that they would like to investigate and address; 4) *Entrepreneurial Opportunities*: students link with economic opportunities in their neighborhoods through business partnerships and 5) *Induction into Community Processes*: students learn to be citizens by investigating issues and making recommendations to policy makers (Smith, 2002).

Place-based education is an approach to teaching and learning that orients children to the values and opportunities that exist in the places where they live. It helps

children and adults recognize assets found in environments closet to them and, makes the walls between school and community more permeable.

Aspects of Place

If you look up *place* in the dictionary, you may find over twenty different definitions. These definitions range from place as meaning *a particular portion of space* to a *function or duty.*[1] Because of these multiple distinctions, it is important to closely look at the various approaches of how place can serve a role in teaching and learning. What follows are descriptions of utilizing place within a larger pedagogical framework grounded in a curriculum of experience.

Place as an Aesthetic Encounter

Today, the lives of children are increasingly solitary and fragmented as many children are from families where both parents are working with fulltime commitments. It is now common to find children coming home to empty homes and functioning independently. Furthermore, a large amount of time is devoted to homework, structured after school activities, and technology such as computer games, social networking websites, television, and MP3 players. The implication of this modern lifestyle is that children have the potential of being isolated, alienated, and removed from a sense of place.

As the use of these technologies become more common, "place" may seem irrelevant. Information and communication are now portable – one can visit places virtually or gain access to information without even leaving one's home, thereby transcending time and space. There is no longer a reliance on physical spaces, surroundings, and places. However, though we may have access to information and communication in these electronically mediated environments, there is a loss of experiencing the particularities of a "place." When environments become irrelevant to

[1] Retrieved June 28, 2009 from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/place

what we are doing, they will lose meaning for us – "*anywhere is nowhere*" – and we are deprived of the aesthetic experiences places provide (Kupfer, 2007).

Places do matter and provide one-of-a-kind experiences that cannot be replicated virtually or vicariously through other media. As Kupfer (2007) notes, "we are losing what makes each place unique, defined by architecture, function, atmosphere, and rhythm —experience will cease to be individualized by setting and our relationship to it, including the responses these particular places call forth from us" (p.43). People interact with places and places illicit reactions from people. If we no longer inhabit a place, we may not have certain experiences that these environments warrant. Furthermore, acquaintance with the local environment can enhance young people's familiarity with what is beautiful and worth preserving – more and more, this familiarity never arises because children spend so much of their time indoors with media that direct their attention away from the local (Smith, 2007).

Similarly, in describing an authentic aesthetic encounter, Greene (2001) argues that "there is a peculiar liveliness and energy with which the mind is activated when works of art are attended to so that the qualitative details emerge and come together, until there is a perception of a whole.... and the enjoyment we experience is a function of the work we are willing to do, to break with the routine, the useful, and the conventional and enter into another, often magical space" (p.45). Places, just as art objects, can provide for these aesthetic encounters as well. They have the power to draw out certain reactions and feelings, and are often taken for granted. This is further illustrated by Kuper (2007) as he writes, "when we interact in and with a place we develop habits that are distinctive of being there, tied to the activities and rhythms that are inherent to being there and not somewhere else" (p.43). A place-based curriculum can build on these nuances and connect with children on a deeper level.

Place as an Asset

I grew up in one of the most historic neighborhoods in New York City – a few blocks away from the notorious Five Points area of the 1800's and around the corner from the Bowery. However, as a child I remember not being particularly interested in my own neighborhood, but instead having aspirations of leaving and living in communities that were represented in the media. It was only after traveling, living, and working in different areas of the U.S. and the world, when I realized how historic and unique my local neighborhood was and developed a keen interest in learning and caring for it. I began to look at my neighborhood – my "place" – as an asset and not as a drawback.

In my work with children in the same neighborhood that I grew up in, I observed children having a different relationship with place. Through a series of neighborhood explorations and interviews with local family members, the children became experts of their neighborhood and became well versed in the local architecture and history of the area. They were empowered to share their knowledge and experiences of the community and at the same time, learned about details that they may have overlooked. Not only does place-based education build on the direct experiences of children, but it may also reveal new understandings. This is further illustrated by Smith as he notes that "cultural and historical investigations can direct students' attention to local assets that might otherwise remain invisible to them, underlining what is valuable in their home communities and regions and potentially deepening their connections and commitment to place" (p. 192, 2007). In addition, research on the role of cultural relevancy in the classroom identifies how students' culture – the values, beliefs, practices, and experiences they bring with them from home, communities, and heritage – can be an integral part of a student's successful academic experience when teachers know how to

build on them (Lensmire & Sato, 2009). All children *come from* or *are part of* some place so it is makes sense to build on this foundation.

Place as Identity

Places shape identities. When we consider how places and people are often linked, it can help us understand the way in which children experience their landscapes and how it may impact their development. When surroundings are familiar, children may feel comfortable and secure, which can have an impact on their sense of self, and place-based education has the potential to heighten this sense of familiarity. This idea is further demonstrated by psychoanalyst Searles as he writes that "the non-human environment apparently provides, in the life of a normal infant and child, a significant contribution to his emotional security, his sense of stability, continuity of experience, and his developing sense of personal identity" (as cited in Hart, 1979, p. 417). Furthermore, in Hart's study, children's learning about themselves through their interactions with the environment arose frequently as an important theme of children's place experience (1979, p. 328).

In addition, places provide contexts that can help children become aware of their abilities and personality traits. Searles illustrates this idea by writing that "one role of the landscape in normal ego development is as a kind of shock absorber upon which a child can project various parts of him or herself until his or her ego is sufficiently strong to integrate them into a developing sense of self" (as cited in Hart, 1979, p. 417). Furthermore, according to German educator and founder of the Kindergarten movement, Froebel, children have a desire to comprehend the extent and diversity of the world in order to better comprehend their own place within it (as cited in Hart, 1979). By including locality in the curriculum, children become sensitive to their interactions with

the environment and the local landscapes frame a setting for which children can explore and experiment.

Place as an Artifact

As a child, I took my surroundings for granted – I felt that my local park in Lower Manhattan was always there, and always looked the way it did. I did not give it much consideration whether it had always existed or not – to me, it was just a park that we went to play. It was not until I came across a historic photograph of the area – without the park – that I realized places did not just exist. Soon afterwards, I learned that the park was created as a result of an effort influenced by Jacob Riis' photographs of deteriorating conditions of tenement life in Lower Manhattan. As a result of this activism, the city government cleared deplorable tenements that were once on the land where the park now stands and provided the neighborhood with an open space for recreation. This discovery led to my realization that people can impact the quality of their surroundings.

Therefore, I felt a natural affinity for Gruenewald's concept of looking at places as artifacts of human cultures (2003). An artifact is defined as any object created or manipulated by human beings.[2] Looking at places as products of human decision-making can empower students to question, challenge, and even offer solutions to concerns that their communities may be facing. It also highlights a broader awareness to the process of place-making — that places are not inevitable, but rather, are created and can be changed. In this sense, "places become windows to understanding social and cultural practices, as well as contexts for the practice of democracy" (Gruenewald, Koppelman & Elam, 2007, p.233).

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[2] Retrieved on July 1, 2009 from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/artifact

When children can see themselves as part of the place-making process, it also helps them to see the complexity of situations. Children can offer a range of perspectives on understanding their surrounding environment. This is also illustrated by Hart as he writes that when children engage with their environments, they will learn to see a range of outcomes from their environmental manipulations and will have to learn to make trade-offs within the framework of a developing sense of social and environmental responsibility (1979). However, in order to even consider social and environmental responsibility, there should be a deep understanding of the communities that children live in, and as Robert Yaro, a regional planner in New York City stated, "stewardship springs from connectedness" (as cited in Sobel, 1998, p. 9). By seeing *place as an artifact*, the interconnectedness of places is demonstrated and the possibility of change becomes more tangible.

Pedagogy Informed by Place

Places provide a plethora of ways to serve as a teaching tool. It can serve as a context for children to draw from their experiences, a source for curriculum development, and as a method to demonstrate relational thinking in a concrete way. Pedagogy informed by place provides for a dynamic educational experience because place-based education does not rely on prefabricated content to convey understanding. Rather, its strength comes from the organic nature of its attachment to the specific environment immediately surrounding the school, a particular natural feature, or a unique community resource.

Places as Context for Experiences and Curriculum

One of the most natural ways for children to learn is from their personal experiences with their surroundings. This concept is foundational, and is further illustrated by Dewey as he writes that "amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference; namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (1938, p. 25). By using local settings, learning is contextualized and made concrete with tangible examples, and can offer children opportunities for deeper connections. Mitchell also reiterates this idea as she argues that in designing curriculum, "the dominating logic should be of the children's experiences and not of the subject matter, and that their environment furnishes a field of explorations and discoveries - since children's experiences begin in the immediate communities in which they are brought up and since these communities are functioning in terms of the present-day culture, it is the school's job to begin with the children's own environment" (2001, p. 9). In this way, the local environment serves as a source for experiences and curriculum.

Places Reveal Relational Thinking

Mitchell (2001) defined human geography not as a science for collecting factual data, but rather as a way to discover significant relationships between earth forces and people – what people do to the earth and what the earth does to the people. It is through these discoveries that can lead to an awareness of how our communities are interconnected. This is further illustrated by Mitchell as she writes "it becomes necessary for children and their teachers to understand and appreciate the basic relationship between people and earth and between distinct cultures and their environments - this kind of understanding of the physical environment inevitably leads to exploration and awareness of the social forces of the community in its many forms" (Mitchell, 2001, p.101). Place-based education is part this exploration of human geography. It helps children see and understand how their local environment "works". This is also demonstrated by Cohen as she argues that "any content gains its significance from its meaning to people, not from its extensiveness as a collection of facts, and to gain understanding of human social organization and thought, children must be introduced to the basic concepts and relationships that underlie human, natural, or mechanical phenomena" (1972, p.150). Moreover, place-based learning is a prime example of what Mitchell defined as relationship thinking, which "occurs when children actively make connections among pieces of data" (2001, p. 108).

Though Mitchell wrote the following words more than 75 years ago, it still holds true for many children today, as it has in my own reflections of childhood experiences growing up in Lower Manhattan:

> "The forces which move his elevator, warm his nursery, extend his mother's voice to a grocery store, cool his milk, propel the subway train are complicated and difficult to understand. Most of them are hidden from him; indeed they may be hidden from his parents. He lives in a world of end-products with the functioning

> causes largely concealed. He is likely to grow up so used to unexplained end-products that he does not form the habit of seeking for causes, for underlying relationships. Which is a round-about way of saying that, so far as this functioning aspect of his environment is concerned, he is likely to grow up without thinking, without opportunity for experimentation. The forces controlling the familiar functioning aspects of his environment are largely hidden from him." (2001, p.6).

Place-based education has the potential of revealing how these relationships function. It offers content and methods that can support children's knowledge of their world based on the relationship among their physical, cultural, and ecological environments and themselves.

Developmental Appropriateness of Place-Based Education (PBE) in Elementary Education

PBE & Children's Natural Tendencies

During my studies at Bank Street College, I have learned about the value of a curriculum strongly grounded in child development. Cohen (1972) states "the purpose of children's schooling must be the expansion of their minds and the enhancement of their selves" (p. 245). Children must be able to conceptualize information and to respond to it emotionally. One of the best ways to achieve this response is by relating the curriculum to their own experiences. Learning is deep and rich when children have the opportunity to build on their previous experience and knowledge. Cohen (1972) writes "intellectual growth is actually more fulfilling and stimulating when the children's feelings and interests, their stage of thinking, and social relating are utilized in the service of supporting their wanting to know" (p. 256). Furthermore, "when content has reality for children, it serves to stimulate further growth in the power to deal with abstractions" (Cohen, 1972, p. 248). By including the local environment in the curriculum, place-based education is well poised to tap into children's natural tendencies. It makes learning significant, relevant, and serves as a foundation for further connections.

PBE & Critical Period of Interacting with the Environment

Children are instinctively drawn to exploring the world around them. This impulse is especially heightened between the ages of five and twelve as children start to "move away" from home and begin making geographic sense of their world. These experiences with the surrounding environment seem to fulfill a biological need for children during middle childhood. This is further supported by Edith Cobb as she writes " the study of the child in nature, culture, and society reveals that there is a special period,

the little understood, pre-pubertal, middle age of childhood, approximately from five to six to eleven or twelve, between the strivings of animal infancy and the storms of adolescence – when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of some profound continuity with natural processes" (as cited in Sobel, 1998, p.12). Studies in the local environment can support children during this critical period and can raise an awareness of children's relationship to the ecological chain of which they are a dependent and interrelated part.

PBE & Social-Emotional Development

Today's world is a very complex one. Yet a comfortable sense of knowing, even in a small way, supports a child's feelings of security and competency. A study of the local environment can help children make sense of their observations and experiences in a manageable and concrete way. This concept is further illustrated by Cohen as she argues "understanding even a small part of the organization of urban existence encourages children to find their way with some feeling of competency in the complicated adult social structures surrounding them" (1972, p. 151). Place-based education can support this sense of competency as well as the social-emotional development of children.

Place-Based Education in Practice

To highlight practices in place-based education, I have provided vignettes of my own learning and teaching experiences in settings where the local environment plays a significant role.

Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA): Place-based Social History

Nestled on the second floor of a former NYC public school building on the corner of Mulberry and Bayard streets in Lower Manhattan is a small, community-based organization dedicated to the Chinese American experience. Founded in 1980, this organization started as a local history project led by community residents and activists as a response to concerns that memories and experiences of aging older generations would vanish without oral history, photo documentation, and collecting efforts, and to develop a better understanding of Chinese American history. Today, it is known as the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), and is dedicated to documenting, preserving, and reclaiming the history of what is one of the oldest Chinese settlements in the United States.

However, as a long time resident of Chinatown, Lower Manhattan, this museum symbolizes the first place where *my story* belonged. Because I felt such as disconnect from what was taught in the classroom and my early childhood experiences, I always felt that American history was far away, long ago, and had nothing to do with my own experiences. It was not until I visited MOCA as an undergraduate student when I began to understand how my heritage and experiences fit within the larger context of American history and culture.

Traditionally, the history of Asians in the United States has not been considered a part of the American historical canon. The legacy of racial marginalization and legalized

exclusion (for example, the Chinese Exclusion Acts, which were in force between 1882-1943) left significant silences in the American historical record (Tchen, 1992). Therefore, MOCA serves as a repository to fill this lack of historical sources about one of the nation's oldest ethnic communities.

As part of my supervised fieldwork at Bank Street, I interned in the museum's education department and facilitated gallery programs and walking tours with student groups. Through examinations of primary sources such as artifacts, photographs, oral histories, and the built environment, students learned about the successive waves of Chinese immigrants, their motivations for coming, and how they shaped American society. Instead of textbooks, everyday objects often served as starting points for discussions about immigration and even encouraged students to make connections with their personal experiences. This focus on ordinary people and the local community is a prime example of a place-based approach to social history.

The Museum of Chinese in America helps to provide a more integrative and inclusive community history based on first hand experiences and a geographical context. It created a space in which social issues are open for examination – especially for those who have not been part of mainstream representations in our public culture. This concept is reiterated by one of the original founders of the museum as Tchen writes that "the humanities can help to fundamentally question and reenvision who we are and what we should be doing - it can be a magnificent tool for what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire terms empowering people in "naming", and thereby changing, their worlds" (1992, p. 320). This idea of naming or identifying is one of the significance of grounding learning in place.

The people of Lower Manhattan and its surrounding area do not come from a single homogeneous group. Rather, they represent a variety of racial, cultural, economic,

and linguistic backgrounds that have come together over the course of history. As an educator in this community, I have found that students learn best when school experiences are related to their personal lives. As they become aware of their cultural legacies, they are able to achieve a clearer, firmer sense of themselves as individuals, and thus better succeed in school and in life.

Landmark West! The Built Environment and Advocacy

Huddled on the corner of 95th street and West End Avenue on an early spring morning, students with clipboards are jotting down observations of the surrounding built environment. Among the statements that can be heard said by fifth grade students are comments such as " I think that building is an example of gothic revival because of the pointed arches" or " there's a building across the street that has a lot of bay windows sticking out of the facade". These exchanges involving architectural vocabulary are commonly heard among participants in Landmark West!'s Keeping the Past for the Future (KPF) educational program.

Landmark West! is a community-based organization working to preserve the architectural heritage of Manhattan's Upper West Side. Founded in 1985, LANDMARK WEST! works to achieve landmark status for individual buildings and historic districts as well as leads a number of educational and advocacy initiatives. As part of the Keeping the Past for the Future curriculum, students explore their immediate neighborhood, learning about the various building types and architectural elements that form the Upper West Side community. KPF is designed to foster a strong sense of engagement, ownership, and responsibility toward their community through learning about the built environment and its history.

As a preservation educator with the Keeping the Past for the Future program, I

had the opportunity to witness how engaged students were in the study of "place". This interest was particularly evident in my work with a group of fifth graders as we were exploring different architectural styles within a three-block radius from their school. Though many of the students attended the same school for a number years, some students told me that they were "seeing" their school neighborhood for the first time. They were surprised that many of the architectural styles we discussed in class -- Art Deco, Romanesque Revival, Gothic, and Beaux Arts – were accessible in their own "backyard."

The students were also introduced to the idea of advocacy and community participation. We discussed a real life scenario involving a neighborhood building undergoing a process of renovation. Through articles in the New York Times as well as community newspapers, we learned that some residents were upset at the possibility of the building changing its appearance since it is one of the few examples of Romanesque Revival architecture on the Upper West Side. Since the building did not have landmark status, the "look" of the building could be completely altered. This background information provided the context to introduce the process of landmark designation in New York City. Students were challenged to think about change in the neighborhood and what local residents can do about these changes. Some students felt that it was fine to change the original design of the building while others felt that it should not be renovated in an effort to preserve the original details of the building. They expressed their opinions in letters addressed to the landmarks preservation commission, which is one of the very ways residents have voiced their concerns about the building and changes to the neighborhood.

Through direct, firsthand experiences, students examined features that made their place unique and special, and even learned about community participation in the preservation of the built environment. Landmark West!'s Keeping the Past for the Future program creates a connectedness with the local environment by introducing students to the idea of architectural heritage as a living visual record of the past. This awareness can lead to an increased attachment, concern, and respect for the local area. This sense of stewardship is echoed by Hudspeth as he writes " students develop an ethic of environmental stewardship where they feel a part of their local landscape and experience a sense of connectedness, of belonging to the community as citizens – this sense of community encourages the students to cultivate and sustain the unique qualities of their place, and provides an impetus for activism when the integrity of that environment becomes threatened" (Hudspeth, 1998, p. 95). In this way, place-based education helps students become advocates for their communities.

Student Teaching Placement: Bringing the Community into the Classroom

My first introduction to narrowing the distance between classroom and community occurred during my student teaching placement in a New York City public school first grade classroom. The curriculum was grounded in the children's experiences and driven by their questions of the community. Inquiry formed the basis of their studies and students learned how to use many different resources to find answers to their questions.

The school community served as a resource and interviews of family members were one of the primary research tools students used in finding answers to their inquiries. For example, in our exploration of a local construction site, many students had

questions about how buildings were designed and used. We were fortunate to have families working in a diverse number of occupations that helped with our interviews. A mother of a student, who worked as an architect, answered questions about how buildings were designed while a father of a student, who worked as a plumber, answered questions about how buildings get their water. In our study of workers in the neighborhood, our class was invited into the workplace of one of our fathers who worked as a doorman. Students had many questions about the role of the doorman – since many of the students lived in buildings that have doormen, and were able to observe his responsibilities first hand.

Through family interviews, the lines between classroom and community were blurred. Family members became one of the "experts" that children drew their information from in their inquiries. Students learned how to take notes and asked relevant questions based in their observations in the community. Applying these locally focused educational experiences to the curriculum added a new and vital dimension to my teaching and learning. Not only were children highly engaged in the content, but I also witnessed how a place-based curriculum can build community by showcasing the value of people and their stories and experiences.

The Long Trip at Bank Street: Place-based Teacher Education

The annual Long Trip was a Bank Street tradition between the years of 1935 and 1951, and started by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Bank Street's founder. Through this trip, teachers traveled to distant social and physical environments and learned through direct experience - the very process of inquiry teachers were being taught to use with children. Though no longer a degree requirement, I had the opportunity to attend the revived Long Trips to Reykjavik, Iceland and New Orleans, Louisiana as a graduate student and experienced place-based teacher education.

Reykjavik, Iceland

A cohort of Bank Street faculty, graduate students, administrators, and alumni were invited to visit and meet with faculty members of preschools and teacher education programs in Reykjavik, Iceland for seven days in April 2007. Visiting these schools (also known as play schools) heightened my awareness of how the environment can affect teaching and learning.

One of the common elements that stood out in these schools was a sense of freedom that children seemed to experience. We witnessed children roaming from room to room, even if a teacher was not present. Teachers trusted children to work alone as they were deeply engaged in their play. In addition, classrooms were simple and uncluttered with little visual stimulation, and in stark contrast with "print heavy" preschools in New York City.

This freedom was also reflected in how children played with materials. We observed children creating block formations that represented their understanding of the world around them. Children stacked large hollow blocks on top of one another to create

platforms from which they could jump, climb, and even slide. Throughout the play schools we visited, children could be seen creating elaborate block mazes and platforms that supported their natural tendency to move and challenge their bodies. Traveling with more experienced educators, I learned that this physical interaction with blocks seemed to be unique to Iceland as it had not been observed in any other preschools. This phenomenon – children being impacted by the surrounding environment – was also seen on one of the original Long Trips to a coal mining town in West Virginia in children's use of materials. On the Long Trip to Arthurdale, West Virginia, though the materials and activities looked the same, the children used them to reflect their distinct world of experience - instead of skyscrapers, their block buildings were the low buildings of Arthurdale and their paintings were of the rolling fields (Vascellaro, 1999, p. 47). Though children in Reykjavik played with similar materials that can be found in the United States, their method of expression was different[3] and this difference can be attributed to the particularities of their environment.

New Orleans, Louisiana

Two years later, I traveled on my second Long Trip to New Orleans, Louisiana where we met with community-based organizations involved with the rebuilding of New Orleans after the impact of Hurricane Katrina. It was during this trip where I witnessed the power of place-based education, community empowerment, and advocacy.

As the series of events unfolded after Hurricane Katrina, it was apparent that local and federal resources did not respond to the needs of the community. Even after three years from when the catastrophic event occurred, many basic utilities and city

[3] Lucy Sprague Mitchell referred to this expression as "outgo" and part of a complementary learning process with the idea of "intake". Intake occurs when children see, hear, read, or in some other way are exposed to new information. Outgo occurs when children recreate their intake through some means of expression (Mitchell, p. 107, 2001).

services have not returned to some areas of the Lower Ninth Ward[4]. Despite this neglect, I was inspired by the resiliency displayed by the community-based organizations spearheading the recovery effort. People who have a deep connection to the area – either through their work, place of residence, or people associated with the locale — led many of these groups. These organizations ranged from groups involved with helping residents return to the Lower Ninth Ward to environmental justice groups that supported individuals in gaining access to basic human rights such as clean water, appropriate shelter, and fresh food, which as a New Yorker I have often taken for granted.

One example illustrating the significance of place-based education is the creation of an observation deck showcasing a former freshwater cypress swamp affected by artificial canals and levee construction. Along the southern edge of the Lower Ninth Ward is a body of water called the Bayou Bienvenue Wetland Triangle and was comprised of many cypress trees, which not only provided natural beauty but also offered storm protection. These trees reduced the height and velocity of storm surges and sheltered human-made levees from waves. However, due to a century of levee construction and canal building, the swamp converted to an open water marsh thereby making the water too saline for cypress trees to survive. As result, tens of thousands of acres of wetlands were destroyed and made the area more vulnerable to flooding despite the human-made levees.

In the months after Hurricane Katrina, students from various colleges around the country in collaboration with local community-based organizations and residents designed and built an observation platform of the Triangle. The purpose of this simple,

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[4] [4] The Lower Ninth Ward is a distinctive region of New Orleans, Louisiana that is located in the easternmost downriver portion of the city. During Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Lower Ninth Ward suffered the most devastation in the area where the force of the water did not merely flood homes, but smashed or knocked many off their foundations. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_9th_Ward on October 10, 2009.

yet powerful project is to inform visitors of the environmental significance of restoring a healthy cypress swamp to the sustainability of the Lower Ninth Ward. Visitors not only learn about the wetlands and its socio-environmental connections to the neighborhood, but also about proposals for restoration and possibilities for involvement.

Though the Long Trip originated more than 70 years ago, the purpose of the trip is still the same. While in New Orleans, I had the opportunity to talk with individuals involved with various concerns affecting local residents, many of which had already existed before Hurricane Katrina. Meeting with these activists heightened my awareness of the fact that children are not isolated from societal and political issues, and made me consider how I would translate this awareness into my teaching practice. In this way, my experience paralleled some of the original participants' experiences of the Long Trip. As Vascellaro writes, "in tracing the history of the Long Trip, its foundation is built on the progressive belief that the school was to create a more democratic society – a belief intensified by the turmoil of the 1930's – the trip became one way to prepare teachers to be part of creating that society, as teachers and as citizens…responsible action was tied to knowledge and caring – both of which would result from enlarging the students' world across geographical, social, class, and cultural differences – by leading the students to where things were happening" (p. 244, 1999).

When I look back, this experience will be a defining moment in my life. The Long Trip to New Orleans impacted my thinking on so many different levels - as an educator, as a learner, as a citizen, as an activist. Prior to my trip to New Orleans, I felt I had a clear understanding of environmentalism. However, the Long Trip helped me see that I might have had a sentimental, and even romanticized view of environmentalism – that it is not just about enjoying or appreciating the outdoors or saving whales or polar bears – but that it is also about access to basic human rights and needs. I left New Orleans

thinking about how the people we met had such a profound sense of place and continue to think about what I can do as an educator to help children build a similar sense of place and rootedness.

The Long Trip is a prime example of place-based teacher education. By taking graduate students, faculty members, and other educators to different social and physical environments, participants enhanced their understanding of the difference location makes on teaching and learning as well as underlying themes that transcend location. This process of learning by leaving a familiar setting and entering into a new context elevated my awareness of place, expanded my understanding of how people are shaped by places, and instinctively helped me make connections to my "own place" – thereby considering educational implications.

Conclusion

Everyone has a personal geography. Like people everywhere, our lives are shaped by the locations in which we live, and this sense of place forms the fabric of our daily existence. Building on this natural affinity for place, I have come to embrace the concepts of place-based education through the harvest of my own experiences as a student, and as a teacher. These experiences confirmed my understanding of the value of place-based explorations. Grounding learning in place helps revitalized communities by reconnecting people to the built, cultural, and natural world in creative and deeply thoughtful ways. Through a curriculum based on the local setting, children develop a sense of connectedness and comprehend their place in the community and world. Place-based education illustrates both the unique particularity of that environment as well as its universality and connection to a broader human story.

In an era marked by standardization and high stakes testing as well as the proliferation of technology, it is my hope that this independent study can serve as a resource for educators to learn more about place-based education as well as provide a theoretical framework to advocate for the use of the local environment in curricula. To this end, place-based education seems particularly relevant in this time in history where there is a growing need for stewardship, personal responsibility, and commitment to action.

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Appendix

- *Place-based Education Resources*
- *Permission Letters*

Place-based Education Resources: Annotated Bibliography[5]

A Definition of Place-Based Education (PBE)

Sobel, D. (1994). *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*. Great Barrington: The Orion Society.

The text discusses the roots of PBE in environmental education and describes ways in which PBE can be utilized as a methodology for school reform.

Place Attachment in Young Children and Adolescents

Sobel, D. (1993). *Children's Special Places: Exploring the role of forts, dens, and bush houses in middle childhood*: Zephyr Press.

In this book important links are made between the need for special places in the development of children's self identities and offers suggestions for integrating opportunities for the development of special places within curriculum. The text offers some theoretical perspectives on childhood self-identity models as examples for self-identity and place-identity.

Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*. Great Barrington: Orion Society.

The book discusses the issue of the appropriate time in which to introduce students to environmental issues. The focus centers around three distinct stages of child development including early years, ages four to seven, where empathy is developed, Sobel calls this phase "Finding Animal Allies". The second phase of development is exploration, ages seven to eleven, which Sobel calls "Teaching the Landscape. The final phase of development for children ages twelve to beyond fifteen is social action, which Sobel calls "Saving the Neighborhood". Various student accounts are presented within the book demonstrating the various phases of development. The main focus of the book is the concept of "ecophobia", having a fear of the environment. Sobel asks the question of when it is age appropriate to introduce students to environmental issues and how that shapes their future desire to care for and love the environment. He argues within the book that too early of an introduction to heavy environmental concepts and problems leads to a disconnect with the world rather than a love of it.

[5] Adapted from an annotated bibliography created by Jennifer Rosenthal, doctoral student at State University of New York at Albany, NY retrieved from http://www.peecworks.org/PEEC/PEEC_Gen/S02E46448-02E4650E on January 1, 2009

Vickers, V. G., & Matthews, C. E. (2002). Children and Place, Science Activities (Vol. 39, pp. 16): Heldref Publications.

In this article the concept of place attachment and the developmental stages of child discovery are analyzed. The article describes the responsibility that environmental educators have to providing opportunities for children to experience wild places. The article offers a variety of suggested activities for students in grades K-12 to assist with developing a sense of place; each set of activities is broken down by the development stages of child discovery proposed by David Sobel. Sobel's stages of discovery are broken down as follows: Stage 1: Young Children (Ages 4-7) *Empathy: Finding Animal Allies* Stage 2: Pre-Adolescent Children (Ages 7-11) *Exploration: Teaching the Landscape* Stage 3: Adolescents (Ages 12-15) and Adults *Social Action: Saving the Neighborhood.*

Wilson, R. (1997). A Sense of Place. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 24*(3), 191-194.

In this short article the question of where one acquires a "sense of place" is described within the model of place-based education. Wilson explains that place does not refer simply to a geographic location but also to the opportunities that are available to create meaning within a place. Wilson discusses the ideas of the aesthetic qualities of the school environment and how they attribute to a child's creation of a sense of place as well as the potential effects of providing students with accessibility to natural areas.

A Critical Pedagogy of Place

Smith, G. A. (2002). Place-Based Education: Learning To Be Where We Are. *Phi Delta Kappan, 83*(8),584-594.

In this brief article, Smith provides an overview of the topic of place-based education for a public audience. This is monumental piece, because it was the first time that term "place-based education" and its conceptual model had been published in a major educational journal. The article concisely synthesizes five themes of place-based education and provides examples of schools within the nation that are utilizing the approach.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place. *Educational Researcher, 32*(4), 3-11.

The convergence of critical pedagogy and place-based education are discussed and argued through a discussion of a "critical pedagogy of place." This article is a monumental piece of literature, in that it suggests a gap within the field of education and provides the notion that a complimentary relationship between critical pedagogy and place studies exists. Gruenewald justifies the convergence through the relationship between social activism and environmental ethics. The key points to the argument center on the ideas of "decolonization" and "reinhabitation". Decolonization is seen as a removal from exploitation of the natural surroundings and reinhabitation is viewed as the method of reconnection with the environment.

Gruenewald, D. A., & Smith, G. A. (2007). *Place-Based Education: In the Global Age*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This anthology is a compilation of essays about the roots of PBE, where PBE is presently and thoughts on where it is headed in the future. This most recent work of Gruenewald and Smith compliments many of their previous writings on a "critical pedagogy of place" and discusses the implications of how the concepts of "decolonization" and "reinhabitation" may be enacted through educational processes. The text also questions the purpose of education today by offering ideas about the new localism movement. The book is divided into three themes: models for place-based learning, reclaiming broader meanings of education and global visions of the local in higher education. This book also attempts to contribute to the theory and practice within the field of PBE through stories and example.

Smith, G. A. (2007). Place-based education: breaking through the constraining regularities of public school. *Environmental Education Research, 13*(2), 189 - 207.

This article speaks to a general audience about many of the facets of PBE, included is a broad definition of PBE and a historical time line of the place-based education movement to the present.. Smith represents the difficulties that present day school administrators have with initiating and supporting student involvement within real-world controversial topics and student activism. Smith's message is calling out for a pedagogical shift towards meaningful student involvement within topics that address, question and call for policy changes.

Place-based Education School Reform Models

Powers, A. L. (2004). An Evaluation of Four Place-Based Education Programs. *Journal of Environmental Education, 35*(4), 17-32.

This article is written as an introduction to the Place-Based Education Evaluation Consortium (PEEC) mission and philosophy. Powers summarizes a study that was done on four place-based educational programs in practice focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of each model as well as teacher reflections in practice across the programs.

Jennings, N., Swidler, S., & Koliba, C. (2005). Place-Based Education in the Standards-Based Reform Era--Conflict or Complement? *American Journal of Education, 112*(1ov), 44-65.

This article provides a rural studies perspective into the adoption of place-based standards in state educational policy and teacher perception and use of such standards. The developmental process of Vermont's framework of standards was described from their inception to their integration of two place-based educational standards in 2000. Although teachers did not agree on a distinctive definition of place-based education, they did describe the methodologies associated with it and also discussed that the addition of place standards justified their present teaching practices.

Place-based Education Resources: Additional Readings

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Place-based Education Resources: Websites

Antioch University: Center for Place-based Education
http://www.antiochne.edu/anei/cpbe/

City Lore
http://www.citylore.org/

Clearing: the on-line magazine for environmental and place-based education
http://www.clearingmagazine.org/index.html

Conservation Study Institute
http://www.nps.gov/archive/mabi/csi/about/about.htm

Edutopia: How to Make learning Local
http://www.edutopia.org/how-make-learning-local

Global Climate Change Meets Ecophobia by David Sobel
http://www.antiochne.edu/focusthenation/ecophobia_sobel.cfm

Historic Districts Council
http://www.hdc.org/

Massachusetts Studies Project at UMass, Boston
Place based Education: engaging students in their own communities through local history, local culture and the local environment.
http://placebased.typepad.com/placebased_education/

Place Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC):
http://www.peecworks.org/index

Place Matters
http://www.placematters.net/html/home.htm

Promise of Place (A project of the Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement)
http://www.promiseofplace.org/

Rural School and Community Trust: documenting and assessing place-based learning
http://portfolio.ruraledu.org/index.htm

Unicef: Children as Community Researchers
http://www.unicef.org/teachers/researchers/

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Poetry Books Celebrating Place[6]

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Place-based Education Resources: Children's Literature

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Singer, M. (2002). *Footprints on the roof: poems about the earth.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Place-based Education Resources: Children's Literature

Developing a Sense of Place through books about New York City[7]

Brimner, L. D. (2004). *Subway: The story of tunnels, tubes, and tracks.* Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills.

Collier, B. (2000). *Uptown.* New York: Holt.

Curlee, L. (2000). *Liberty.* New York: Atheneum.

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Dorros, A. (1991). *Abuela.* New York: Dutton.

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Johnson, S. T. (1995). *Alphabet city.* New York: Viking.

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MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA

70 Mulberry Street New York NY 10013 T 212 619 4785 F 212 619 4720 E info@mocanyc.org

PERMISSION FORM

I understand that Karen L Lew, Master's Degree Candidate at Bank Street College of Education, is completing for her Integrative Master's Project, an overview of place-based education.

I hereby give permission for the name of **Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA)** to be included in the study.

I understand that the independent study will be housed at the Bank Street College Library. It will have a catalogue number and will be available to students and faculty at Bank Street College of Education and on Inter-Library loan.

7/27/2009

Signed Date

Beatrice Chen
Director of Education
Museum of Chinese in America

LANDMARK WEST!
45 West 67th Street
New York, New York 10023

PERMISSION FORM

I understand that Karen L. Lew, Master's Degree Candidate at Bank Street College of Education, is completing for her Integrative Master's Project, an overview of place-based education.

I hereby give permission for the name of **LANDMARK WEST!** to be included in the study.

I understand that the independent study will be housed at the Bank Street College Library. It will have a catalogue number and will be available to students and faculty at Bank Street College of Education and on Inter-Library loan.

Signed

01/01/09
Date

Debi Germann
Director of Education
LANDMARK WEST!